

26 March 2020

Dear [Uni Connect partnership Chair and Lead]

Uni Connect programme: An update from the Office for Students

I am writing to update you on next steps for the Uni Connect programme. Universities and colleges are facing huge pressures and uncertainties in responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We want to support your efforts to minimise its impact on the students and schools you are supporting, and to avoid placing any unnecessary burdens on you.

Our update to accountable officers on 26 March¹ set out how our regulatory requirements are changing during the period of the coronavirus outbreak. This letter sets out in detail how this will apply to Uni Connect. To summarise:

- **Year one funding (2019-2020)** – We will continue to fund partnerships to maintain capacity and continuity. Financial re-profiles agreed up to July 2020 in the recent winter monitoring will be maintained.
- **Year two funding (2020-2021)** – The Office for Students (OfS) board has agreed in principle to continue funding Uni Connect partnerships during 2020-21. We aim to confirm the position on these allocations in the coming weeks.
- **Targets** – We will not be holding partnerships to account for their 20 per cent engagement targets for the remainder of the academic year.
- **Alternative delivery models** – We expect partnerships to explore alternative modes of engagement and delivery in response to the current environment. In particular, we would like you to identify:
 - How your approach could support broader groups of underrepresented students, not just those in your target schools and wards.
 - The information, advice and guidance needs of students applying to higher education in the current admissions cycle.

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-requirements-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic/.

- **Evaluation** –
 - The April-May 2020 phase of the CFE Research impact evaluation learner survey (for early leavers) will not be taking place, so you do not need to administer this.
 - The CFE evidence review will continue. We encourage all partnerships to submit their latest local evaluation findings to CFE Research if they can by 31 March 2020.
- **Monitoring** – Your OfS account manager will be in touch in the next two weeks to arrange a call with your partnership’s project lead. We want to understand the approach you are taking to revising your engagement and delivery activity, and to identify any ways we can help. We will otherwise try to limit our requests for information at this time. In line with our broader approach to access and participation regulation, we will use future monitoring reports to understand your approach during this period. In doing so, we will take into account the circumstances and assess whether partnerships have made reasonable decisions that take into account the needs of students, especially students from underrepresented groups.

Funding for 2020-2021

At its 16 March 2020 meeting, the OfS board confirmed in principle to continue funding Uni Connect partnerships during 2020-21. We want you to be able to maintain capacity and to resume all aspects of your activity as soon as you are able. We hope to confirm the position on these allocations in the coming weeks, but we need to give consideration to the impact of the coronavirus outbreak across all of our funding before we can do this.

Funding in 2019-20

Partnerships recently submitted monitoring returns for the first six months of phase two of the programme and have re-profiled requests for funding from April to July 2020. These re-profiles were forecast on the basis of increased activity in the last six months of the academic year. We recognise that this increase in activity may not now happen. However, in order to minimise burden we will continue to pay the funding as requested in your re-profiled return.

We will expect partnerships to report any underspend at the end of the summer monitoring period (February to July 2020). We will decide at that point the process for recovering any unspent funds, given that underspending is likely to be higher than previously anticipated.

The OfS is unable to pay in advance of need. We also need to ensure that funding we provide is used appropriately and in the public and student interest.

Targets and alternative models of delivery

We have heard from a number of partnerships about the impact coronavirus is having on the delivery of their programme. With the closure of schools for the duration of the outbreak, we understand that programme activities will need to be delivered in different ways. We also appreciate that staff directly and indirectly involved in the work of the partnerships may be unable to work during this period.

We will not be holding partnerships to account for their delivery targets during this period. But we expect you to explore other ways of delivering your programmes, including by working with partner

organisations with the track record, expertise and capability to support you with this. These alternative modes could include:

- virtual delivery of activity where possible, recognising school closures
- online continuing professional development for teachers
- development of outreach hub website content to support online information, advice and guidance and signposting
- monitoring – including alignment of data processes, checking accuracy of tracking data and tracking system updates
- evaluation, subject to the guidance below
- continued virtual engagement with stakeholders where this is possible
- review of evidence and creation of new case studies.

Support to particular groups of students

As part of your planning, we want you to consider how your approach could support any students from groups identified as underrepresented in higher education in our access and participation guidance² – not just those in your target schools and wards, given the potential reach of the alternative delivery modes we expect to be deployed. We are aware that many partnerships are already planning along these lines. We would also like you to pay particular attention to the information, advice and guidance needs of students who will be applying to higher education during the current admissions cycle, given the disruption to assessments and decision-making this year.

Evaluation

Partnerships should not attempt to run the April to May 2020 wave of the CFE Research impact evaluation learner survey (for early leavers). It would not be appropriate to conduct this activity in the current environment.

The CFE evidence review will continue. We hope that all partnerships will be able to submit their latest local evaluation findings by 31 March 2020 to CFE Research for inclusion in the next evidence review. Please do, however, contact CFE Research if you will have difficulties with this. CFE has already been in touch with your evaluation lead, and the CFE evaluation team (ncop@cfe.org.uk) will be happy to help with any further queries.

Evidence generated through partnership evaluations is hugely important. It helps us to demonstrate how Uni Connect is making a difference, informs funding decisions, and enables us to share learning with the wider sector. So we are keen to sustain this activity, as far as possible, for the longer term.

² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/.

Monitoring

We will try to limit the number of requests we put out to partnerships for information, recognising that you will be working in a very different environment for the duration of the coronavirus outbreak. We do, however, want to understand more about your approach to revising your engagement and delivery model during this period, and to identify any ways in which we can help with this.

Your OfS account manager will be in touch to arrange a call with your partnership lead. We would also encourage you to engage with each other through the Uni Connect community platform and share any creative and innovative delivery models you are planning.

We will need to look at our approach to other aspects of monitoring for the summer return, to take into account the current circumstances. We will provide guidance on our monitoring requirements by the end of July 2020.

In line with our broader approach to access and participation regulation, we will use future monitoring reports to understand your approach during this period. In doing so, we will take into account the circumstances and assess whether partnerships have made reasonable decisions that take into account the needs of students, especially students from underrepresented groups.

Further information

The Uni Connect Team at OfS is here to support you. If you have any questions about the issues raised in this letter or other Uni Connect issues, please email uniconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk. For queries on evaluation and evidence review submissions, please email the CFE evaluation team at ncop@cfe.org.uk.

Information about the OfS's broader approach to coronavirus is at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/coronavirus/. These pages are regularly updated.

If you haven't already done so, please sign up for our regular email alerts, which include a weekly roundup of events, deadlines, publications and news stories, and a monthly update of key publications and announcements: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/sign-up-for-email-alerts/. You can also follow us on Twitter: [@officestudents](https://twitter.com/officestudents).

Finally, as you may know, the Department for Education has launched a helpline to answer education questions about coronavirus. The helpline for higher education staff, students and parents is:

Phone: 0800 046 8687

Email: DfE.coronavirushelpline@education.gov.uk

Opening hours: 0800 to 1800 (Monday to Friday), 1000 to 1600 (Saturday to Sunday).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C Millward', written in a cursive style.

Chris Millward
Director of Fair Access and Participation